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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how characteristics of complex educational change can hinder efforts to achieve equity. It reports that factors beyond the control of educational leaders may hamper their wish of equality. The article is based on an investigation of large-scale local education areas (LEAs) and how initiatives to reorganize schools were managed in the LEAs and the schools. The research concentrated on what happened across the different administrative levels of the education system and the short- and medium-term consequences for school staff once reorganization was complete. To gather data, semistructured interviews and document surveys that concentrated on managing the implementation of approved reorganization proposals were conducted. Results show that the reorganization affected thousands of people, and the many facets of reorganization had different effects on the people involved. Individuals at the school level perceived reorganization as inherently inequitable due to factors beyond their control. Those working in middle schools were particularly threatened as middle-school students were reassigned to elementary schools or high schools. Also, the reorganization initiatives consisted of many interrelated and differentiated parts so that different levels of reorganization occurred among LEAs, resulting in an unequal distribution of power and efforts at equity. (Contains 22 references.) (RJM)

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The Wisdom of Solomon: Achieving Equity in Large Scale Reorganisation of Schooling

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Putting Reorganisation into Practice

The purpose of this paper is to explore how characteristics of complex educational change can render the seemingly straightforward principle of achieving equity in implementing an education policy highly problematic. Factors beyond the control of those responsible for implementing the change may prevent their aspiration to achieve equity for others from being realised in practice. Further, the many people caught up in the change process may construct their interpretation of this principle according to contrasting criteria and to draw on different sources of information in applying it to diverse situations. As a result, their conceptions of equity may prove incompatible: one person's equitable treatment can be another's favouritism or victimisation.

Selected findings will be reported from British research into the implementation of a key education policy of the past Conservative central government: large scale initiatives to reorganise local provision of schools in England. Reorganisation was viewed in this study as an instance of complex educational change, certain characteristics of which affected interaction according to varying and sometimes incompatible conceptions of the principle of equity. Here the label 'equity' is employed to encompass the sentiments of 'fairness', 'fair play', and 'justice' which were expressed by informants. Such sentiments lie within a dictionary definition of equity (Chambers 1998, p547). The principle was most commonly articulated either in terms of fairness, invoked to justify a person's actions affecting outcomes for others, or in terms of unfairness, invoked to complain about the injustice of the intended or unintended consequences of others' actions on the person concerned.

Reorganisation on a large scale implies changing provision of state funded schools across entire English local education authorities (LEAs - equivalent to large districts in the USA). The responsibility for undertaking LEA reorganisation initiatives falls primarily to LEA chief education officers (CEOs - equivalent to school district superintendents) and their colleague officials, the professional staff who carry out the executive tasks of local government. The English education system in which they operate consists of three administrative levels. The pattern of governance for most publicly funded schools determines the involvement of stakeholders at each level in reorganisation of local provision:

- central government - ministers from the elected majority political party regulate the nature, overall resourcing and governance of the national system of schooling. They can employ legislation and resource incentives or penalties to persuade LEAs to remove surplus student places in their schools;
- local government - elected councillors in the majority political party in each locality are responsible for local taxation which part-funds schooling, and for their LEA. They have a duty to regulate the supply of student places which includes taking reorganisation initiatives if deemed necessary;
- school - elected or co-opted members of the governing body for each school represent parents, the local community, the LEA and school staff. (Governing bodies approximate to school boards in the USA but there is a separate governing body for each school.) Governors' responsibilities include appointing staff within an annual budget covering their salaries, set by the LEA according to central government parameters. Headteachers

(principals) attend governors' meetings and may decide whether to accept governor status and so entitlement to vote on governing body decisions. They are responsible for school leadership within the oversight of the governing body.

According to a central government estimate, the number of surplus places across England had reached some 1.5 million by the early 1990s (DES 1992). It was generated by a national decline in the birth rate since the 1970s and by local demographic changes such as population drift away from rural areas. Reorganisation tends to be unpopular with parents and staff in schools who become aware of what they stand to lose from it long before they experience what they might gain. Many local councillors, mindful of the risk that a disliked policy might cost them precious votes among parents of school age children, were unwilling to tackle the mounting surplus. By this time, ministers in the past Conservative central government, like their counterparts in other countries including the USA (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), had embarked on a raft of policies to reduce burgeoning expenditure in the public sector through attempts to increase efficiency of service provision. Within this policy thrust, ministers eventually gave themselves powers to intervene if LEAs with a substantial proportion of surplus places did not undertake reorganisation initiatives of their own (DFE 1994). Accompanying this threat was a central government incentive for LEAs: a related policy enabled them to borrow capital from the centre at a very advantageous interest rate specifically for school building and refurbishment connected with reorganisation. The more places removed, the more capital borrowing allowed.

The rationale for lowering the proportion of surplus places is, fundamentally, economic: to save taxpayers' money required to maintain them. The running costs of a half empty school (including heating, lighting, building maintenance and cleaning) are little less than those for one that is full to capacity. A reorganisation initiative stands to reap substantial long term savings by reducing the number of under-used schools and redistributes students to fill the smaller number of institutions scheduled to remain. Redundant school sites can be sold, a lucrative proposition in urban situations where there is pressure on land for development. Reorganisation also presents a rare opportunity to improve the standard of educational provision, whether indirectly through new building and refurbishment of schools that will remain, or more directly through fostering improvement efforts by school staff (faculty) as they come together to make a fresh start in reorganised institutions (Wallace and Pocklington 1998).

Initiatives are designed to downsize provision amongst all the schools under LEA jurisdiction, which may number several hundred, to match supply of school places in the area more closely with the decline in local demand. Their aim is achieved through an LEA wide programme of closures, mergers, contraction through removal of temporary classrooms, expansion, and changes in the student age range for which institutions cater. The pattern of school governance and legislation affecting reorganisation at the time of the research determined that initiatives affecting any school or group of institutions consisted of three consecutive stages. Following Fullan's (1991) classification of generic components of the change process, they may be distinguished as:

- *initiation* - drafting LEA formative proposals for reorganising schools, statutory consultation with interested parties in the locality including parents of schools scheduled for reorganisation, and submission of formal proposals to central government for approval;

- *implementation* - making arrangements for such proposals as are approved by central government to be enacted by the scheduled reorganisation date, normally at the beginning of a school year. A potentially contentious LEA task was to orchestrate the redeployment, voluntary premature retirement (VPR), or compulsory redundancy (termination of employment) of displaced staff from closing or merging schools. Other key tasks were to complete any new building or refurbishment embodied in proposals and to redistribute furniture and equipment from closing institutions to those that would survive;
- *institutionalisation* - an indefinite period beyond the reorganisation date lasting several years, during which staff in reorganised schools became familiar with working together in the post-reorganisation regime.

Stages consisted of processes punctuated by key events which imposed a 'critical path' of activity leading up to the deadline they represented (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The critical path followed by stages of reorganisation

initiation stage

- the development of LEA proposals (process);
- local publication of these proposals (event);
- statutory local consultation on proposals (process);
- LEA submission of revised proposals to central government for approval (event);
- central government assessment of LEA proposals (process);
- central government decision and announcement (event);

implementation stage

- implementation of approved proposals prior to the scheduled reorganisation date (process);
- formal completion on this date (event);

institutionalisation stage

- subsequent development in schools emerging from reorganisation (process).

LEA initiatives might consist of several phases, each affecting a different locality at any time, but all phases would follow the same stage sequence. Responsibility for leading initiatives was distributed differentially across stages. LEA officials were required to orchestrate the entire initiation stage, while central government ministers set limits to the scope of reorganisation initiatives through their power of decision, at the time of the research, over formal proposals for all schools affected. During the implementation stage, LEA officials held responsibility for preparation to enact all approved proposals which was complemented by the responsibility of governors, headteachers and other senior school staff for making detailed arrangements affecting their own institution. Institutionalisation after the official reorganisation date was primarily a school level responsibility, with LEA officials' involvement reduced to assisting where difficulties arose, and supporting school improvement activity. The focus of this paper is confined to illustrative equity issues arising from interaction amongst stakeholders at local government and school system levels during the implementation stage of the final phase of reorganisation, coloured by their prior

experience of the initiation stage for their phase and their knowledge about experience of earlier phases.

The remainder of the paper considers how the complexity of reorganisation affected equity issues and efforts to resolve areas of contention which emerged. First, the research design and methods are described. Second, a combined cultural and political perspective is put forward which enables patterns of interaction to be explained by foregrounding the reciprocal relationship between individuals' beliefs and values relating to equity and their differential use of power to realise their interests. This perspective facilitates investigating the role of power in shaping culture and the impact of cultural factors on use of power. Third, implications of reorganisation's characteristics as a complex educational change are highlighted for promoting equity. Fourth, a highly contentious equity issue arising during implementation is detailed. It reveals how aspects of the complexity of reorganisation contributed to contradictory beliefs and values about equity and differential uses of power to promote or defend the incompatible sectional interests of two groups. It also shows how an LEA official was able to act as an 'honest broker' to resolve the issue by meeting the sectional interests of both factions. Finally, the conclusion is drawn that the complexity of change may limit the potential for achieving equity despite the best efforts of those responsible for implementation, though practical steps can be taken to minimise the disjunction between alternative conceptions of equity among the various stakeholders involved.

Research Design and Methods

The aim of the investigation was to examine how large scale LEA initiatives to reorganise schools were managed in LEAs and schools within the context of a variety of central, LEA and school policy changes which affected the course of reorganisation. Accordingly, the research concentrated both on what happened across the different administrative levels of the education system and on the short and medium term consequences for school staff once reorganisation was officially over. The Economic and Social Research Council funded the study from January 1996 for two years and nine months. Methods of investigation were qualitative, informed by techniques of data analysis developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Access was negotiated to investigate two major reorganisation initiatives which were already under way. Focused, interpretive case studies (Merriam 1988) were carried out during 1996 and 1997 of the two LEA initiatives and eighteen of their schools, most of which faced radical changes such as merger. Implementation of the final phase of the initiative in one LEA was completed in September 1996, data being collected in the term before reorganisation and for over a year afterwards. Implementation of the final phase of the initiative in the other LEA was completed in September 1997, data being gathered for over a year before the reorganisation date and in the succeeding term. The number of schools reduced to ten from the date of reorganisation when closures and mergers took place.

Semi-structured interviews and document survey concentrated, contemporaneously, on tasks of managing implementation of approved reorganisation proposals and managing schools surviving reorganisation. There was also a retrospective focus on management tasks of those responsible for developing LEA proposals and interaction between groups with an interest in the content of proposals and outcomes of consultation. Supplementary interviews gathered contextual information from headteachers of expanding or closing schools within the same set of proposals as the case study schools in one LEA, and the headteacher and other senior staff

in an expanding county secondary school in the other LEA. Interviews with central government civil servants elicited, retrospectively, information on liaising with the LEAs and assessing formal proposals. Altogether, 325 interviews were conducted with 188 respondents: three quarters with school staff and governors; a fifth with LEA staff; and the remainder with central government civil servants. Research questions were derived from a literature review and exploratory study (Wallace 1996a, 1996b). Fieldnotes were taken during interviews which were also tape recorded. Interview summaries fed into site summaries as the basis for cross-site analysis, data being displayed as matrices; the data set was scanned for broad themes and to explore the contextual complexity of particular situations. A major theme emerging inductively from the data was the diversity of notions and applications of the principle of equity.

A Cultural and Political Perspective on Interaction

The conceptual orientation of the research incorporates a dual cultural and political perspective (Wallace and Hall 1994; Wallace and Huckman 1999) for analysing interaction. This perspective is based on literature about staff professional cultures (Nias et al 1989; Bolman and Deal 1991) and micropolitics (Hoyle 1986; Blase and Anderson 1995). Giddens' (1984) analysis of interaction, entailing a definition of power as either synergistic or conflictual, was used to conceptualise how actors have differential access to resources in endeavouring to realise their interests according to their beliefs and values, which are shared to a varying extent with other parties to interaction.

A simple definition of organisational *culture* is 'the way we do things around here' (Bower 1966). Culture is largely internalised, and the norms or rules of behaviour guiding interaction among those who subscribe to a culture rest on shared symbols, beliefs and values. A core belief guiding actors' use of power to be discussed here was their notion of equity or fairness. Versions of this belief tended to be shared among actors in similar situations, but to differ between actors operating in different locations or at different system levels, according to their limited knowledge of relevant activity outside their first hand experience. Norms may be explicit, perhaps enshrined in a formal policy or code of practice, or implicit, becoming noticeable only when transgressed. Symbolic elements of culture are those where patterns of action represent a shared value. (LEA officials instigated a voluntary code of practice whereby school governors would give priority when filling staff vacancies to redeployment of school staff displaced by reorganisation proposals. This strategy demonstrated the LEA commitment to an equitable approach to managing implementation). Administrators' professional culture encompasses beliefs and values spanning leadership, management, relationships and professional conduct. Where groups share distinctive beliefs and values, they may form subcultures. In such 'differentiated cultures' (Meyerson and Martin 1987), meanings are shared within subcultural boundaries, but there is disjunction between beliefs and values of the different groups.

Power is taken to mean 'transformative capacity': the capability to intervene in events so as to alter their course. Expression of power need not necessarily imply conflict; parties to interaction who cooperate synergistically have ability to work towards shared goals. Equally, each protagonist in a conflict situation may employ transformative capacity to achieve opposing goals. Two forms of power may be distinguished (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980): authority means use of resources legitimated by individuals' beliefs and values associated

with status including the right to apply sanctions, often backed by law. In contrast, influence refers to informal use of resources where there is no recourse to sanctions linked to authority, though other sanctions (such as withdrawal of support) may be available. While access to resources varies, any individual is likely to have access to some form of influence. Parties to interaction are implicated in a flow of action and response where each party acts to realise her or his interest and responds to others' attempt to achieve theirs, which may or may not coincide. Conversely, in everyday situations no individual has absolute power: it is distributed, however unequally, within and between institutions and system levels. People use such resources as are available to them to realise their perceived interest: some desired state of affairs that will contribute to the fulfilment of their purposes. The equity issues to be discussed arose, in part, because the LEA wide promotional interest in implementation of the reorganisation initiatives as a whole could be compatible or incompatible with the sectional interests of groups concerned solely to protect particular schools and their staff. An LEA proposal for closure was never well received within the school community, but a proposal to expand a school to take students from closing institutions likely to be welcomed.

Conflict does not automatically follow from the existence of incompatible interests. Actions to realise contradictory interests, reflecting incompatible beliefs and values (including those relating to equity), may be taken without generating conflict where action to realise one interest is kept separate from action to realise the contradictory interest (Wallace 1991). Equally, no clash may ensue where people are either not aware of their interests or the consequences of their actions, or are unwilling or unable to act on their interests.

Implications of Complex Educational Change for Achieving Equity

A dictionary definition of the adjective 'complex' is: 'composed of more than one, or of many parts; not simple or straightforward; intricate; difficult' (Chambers 1998, p336). The overarching feature of complex educational change lies in its duality as a single entity - the change itself (like reorganisation of schooling), and as a set of constituent parts (such as the range of people affected by reorganisation and their differential awareness of each other's activity).

There can be no clear distinction between simple and complex educational changes. They may be more usefully conceived as ranging along a continuum from the relatively simple, as in teachers' routine experience of receiving a new class of students, to the highly complex. As the complexity of educational change increases, so does the range of its constituent parts and the amount of interaction between them. Complex educational changes vary. Some parts may be more or less universal, like the significance of forms of interaction other than face-to-face. Others may be particular to the content and context of the change at hand. So although it is impossible precisely to specify the parts whose combined contribution makes up the complexity of all complex educational changes, it is plausible to identify key characteristics, some of which may be generic or at least have applicability beyond the immediate situation.

Understanding large scale reorganisation of schooling as an instance of complex educational change implies consideration of patterns amongst the myriad interactions within and between administrative levels of the education system that this change embodies, together with the contexts in which these interactions were embedded. A hierarchically ordered typology of characteristics derived from the data is summarised in Figure 2. There are five overarching

characteristics, each subdivided into more detailed constituents. The latter which are depicted in bold type in the diagram are particularly salient to the emergence of equity issues. While such characteristics and constituents may be distinguished analytically, they clearly interrelate closely and may contribute in combination to particular equity issues.

Figure 2: Some characteristics of complex educational change with management implications

1.

Magnitude

- large number of people affected
- extensive range of specialist knowledge and priorities
- multiplicity of disparate management tasks
- **plurality of partially incompatible beliefs and values, within limits**

2.
Differential Impact

- variable extent of change in individuals' practice and new learning required
- **variable emotive force, which may alter over time**
- **varied congruence with sectional interests, which may alter over time**
- varied reciprocal effect on other ongoing activities
- **variable awareness of the totality beyond that part of direct concern**

3.
Interrelated and Differentiated Parts

- **range of sequential and overlapping components**
- **diversity of components affecting different individuals and groups at particular times**

4.
Inside a Multilevel System

- multidirectional flow of coordinated interaction within and between system levels
- **unequal distribution of power within and between system levels**
- interdependence between all individuals and groups affected
- **ambiguity due to network of interactions producing diverse consequences across levels**
- **mixture of direct encounters and interaction through intermediaries**
- management tasks across system levels

5.
Interaction with a Multidimensional Context

- **impact of evolving profile of other planned and unplanned changes**
- **impact of accretion of past changes**

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First, the sheer scope or *magnitude* of LEA reorganisation initiatives meant that some thousands of people from over a hundred school communities, including teachers, governors and parents, were affected by LEA proposals with implications for their sectional interest in, respectively, the future of their employment, their school or their children's education. Since the number of schools in each LEA was due to fall under the proposals, the sectional interests of most school communities in retaining their existing arrangements at least and improving them at best could not all be accommodated. In several localities in one LEA, a three-tier system of 5-9 first, 9-13 middle and 13-18 high schools was to be replaced by a two-tier 5-11 primary and 11-18 secondary school system. Several middle schools were to be closed. The younger students they catered for would stay on in first schools, filling their surplus capacity as they expanded to become primary schools. Older students would enter high schools, similarly filling their surplus capacity as they expanded to become secondary schools. The interest of middle school staff in retaining their sector was therefore compromise, but the interests of staff in first and high schools in expansion were met.

Members of the various school communities subscribed to a *plurality of partially incompatible beliefs and values, within limits* of certain assumptions about the nature of their entitlement and constraints on alternative courses of action. LEA officials used their influence to persuade governors and headteachers of schools with staff vacancies to give priority to the interests of teachers on permanent contracts who would be displaced under a proposal to close their school. In both LEAs, the majority of new teaching appointments made in the years immediately preceding reorganisation were temporary, the contract terminating at the date of reorganisation. This strategy protected displaced staff on permanent contracts because it increased the number of vacancies available for which they might apply to gain redeployment. It was implicitly based on the principle of 'last in, first out', but it brought the inequitable consequence of disadvantaging incoming teachers who were able to secure only a temporary contract. The latter tended not to accept this principle. The experience of being excluded from applying for other posts led one teacher on a temporary contract to comment that 'you just felt you were a nobody'. Agreeing to give priority to redeploying staff displaced by reorganisation when filling vacancies also compromised governors from using their authority to act according to their contradictory but widely held principle of 'selecting the best person for the job'. The field of displaced candidates from within the LEA would be much smaller than a national field could have been. On the other hand, no one questioned the assumption that displaced staff should be supported in some way.

Germane to questions of equity were beliefs and values about the potential gains or losses embodied in the proposal for a particular school or sector of schools compared with gains or losses for other institutions in the LEA. Legal requirements dictated that staff with permanent contracts of employment in closing schools must lose their present job. They therefore faced the possibility of being made redundant, though they would be eligible to apply for vacancies arising in schools due to expand and older staff might be eligible to apply for voluntary premature retirement instead. Staff on permanent contracts in schools which would be reorganised without closing (by, say, expanding to take younger or older students) did not face any threat to their present employment. One long-serving deputy headteacher (vice principal) in a closing middle school implied that most middle school staff shared the belief that, as a group, they were at a relative disadvantage compared with colleagues in other school sectors: 'The people in first schools are sitting pretty in terms of their job being secure.

And there is the same situation in the high school'. Staff in the latter sectors tended not to perceive that they were privileged in comparison with staff from closing middle schools. In the words of a middle school headteacher: 'What has happened in reality is that all those in middle schools are targeted for punishment – or the pain, shall we say? And everybody else is rather thoughtless about it.'

Second, the many facets of reorganisation had very *differential impact* on the people involved. For individuals at school level, reorganisation was inherently inequitable due to factors beyond their control connected with the range of LEA proposals for different institutions: some would close, some would be merged with or without new building or refurbishment, while some would both expand and benefit from building improvements. The *emotive force* of reorganisation proposals was greatest for those who perceived their sectional interests to be most severely threatened and who felt powerless because they were allowed no part in the relevant decisions, such as staff in schools scheduled for closure who wished to retain their job, or parents there who wished to preserve their children's present school. One site supervisor (janitor) in a middle school due to close and reopen as the lower school site of a secondary school endured several years of uncertainty not only over his job but also over his home. He occupied a house on the middle school site which he would lose if he was made redundant when the school was reorganised. Eight months before the reorganisation date, he had still heard nothing about his future, commenting:

> I feel appalled at the way the whole thing has been handled...I am still in this sort of limbo, this not knowing...We have always been left in the cold. Anything that has come back to caretakers is just filtered through on the grapevine.

A middle school headteacher, just old enough at fifty to be eligible for voluntary premature retirement, had decided with regret to take this step to avoid being made redundant. He was not ready to leave the teaching profession, yet he did not have the enthusiasm to attempt to secure a new headship elsewhere:

> I am going to be so wounded and sad when this school shuts that I don't think six weeks later I could breeze into another school and say, 'Here I am, ten more years [of service], I'm your man.'...If I was younger, I would be happy to go elsewhere. If I were slightly older, retirement would be more appropriate.

Others welcomed proposals where they were *congruent with their sectional interests*, as in the case of staff in secondary schools which stood to benefit by taking younger students from closing middle schools. Some secondary school staff even gained promotion as new management posts were created to administer the expanded institution. They tended to feel empowered and equitably treated.

Central to considerations of equity were the sources of comparison within any criteria for judgement of the fairness of particular proposals or their consequences. These criteria and sources varied widely, giving rise to incompatible judgements because *awareness of the totality of the change beyond that part of direct concern* was hierarchically distributed. Senior LEA officials had an overview of the initiative as a whole, though they were shorter on appreciation of the impact of their efforts on particular schools and communities than the people based at this level. School staff and parents had only a summary view of the

reorganisation initiative, sketchy knowledge of its impact on individuals and institutions other than those in the immediate locality, but detailed awareness of what lay within their first hand experience. The quality of information was equally varied, ranging from official cross-LEA statistics, through direct experience within a school or group of schools, to impressions or rumours distributed through teachers' informal network of contacts.

LEA officials had authority to make premature retirement offers to school staff according to a complex set of criteria governed by legislation, not all of which had to apply in each instance. They included:

- eligibility for VPR being confined to staff on permanent contracts aged fifty or more;
- a VPR offer being coupled with avoidance of a redundancy (but not necessarily in the same school as the person receiving the voluntary premature retirement offer);
- a VPR offer alleviating a deficit in the school's annual operating budget (which encompassed staffing costs).

The criteria reflected in individual offers varied and, moreover, they were not necessarily made public. It was very difficult for staff from nearby schools to understand why, say, in one expanding first school, the deputy headteacher was given early retirement (it was on condition that governors appointed a displaced teacher from a closing school who would otherwise be made redundant to replace her). While at another, a teacher who was eligible on grounds of age was refused VPR (because no displaced teacher from a closing school wished to replace her, so her VPR was not linked with avoiding a redundancy). Lack of knowledge of the criteria employed by LEA officials in diverse circumstances made the VPR procedure seem inequitable to the uninitiated.

Third, the fact that reorganisation initiatives consisted of many *interrelated and differentiated parts* added to the variation amongst criteria and sources of comparison for judging the fairness of specific proposals or actions to implement them. The *range of sequential and overlapping* components of reorganisation (see Figure 1) meant that, at any time, individuals associated with particular schools could be experiencing a different stage of reorganisation according to which sequential annual phase of reorganisation covered their locality. Staff in one area at the initiation stage could be facing possible redundancy while colleagues in another area at the institutionalisation stage could have already secured their future employment.

Further, the *diversity of components affected different individuals and groups at particular times*. Equity considerations tended to reflect the component of immediate import: preparation for closure during the implementation stage gave rise to concerns over the fair redistribution of furniture and equipment from the closing school to others which would now be taking the students from this institution. The head of the science department at one secondary school believed that staff in the local primary schools might perceive him as 'hovering like a vulture waiting for the [middle] schools to close'. But promoting equitable distribution of science equipment suited his sectional interest in the students he would eventually receive being taught science effectively before they came to his school. He added: 'That's not what I'm thinking at all. It's in my interest to let as much of the equipment go to the primary schools as possible so that they are fully equipped.'

Fourth, this change took place across *a multilevel system*, yet individuals involved were all based either at central government, at LEA or at school level. The *unequal distribution of power within and between system levels* was reflected in differential authority connected with reorganisation. LEA officials were authorised by local councillors to proceed with the reorganisation initiatives within parameters set by central government, which included approaching their tasks according to their conception of equity, what one official described as the LEA's 'professional approach'. The staff, governors and parents in school communities had authority only to respond to the statutory requirement at the initiation stage that they be consulted on LEA proposals for their school, having therefore to rely on influence if they wished to persuade LEA officials to respond, in turn, to their conception of equitable treatment. The multiplicity of system levels led to an enduring element of *ambiguity due to the network of cross-level interactions producing diverse consequences.* LEA officials' well-intentioned actions with equity in mind could produce consequences which appeared inequitable to those at school level according to their view of equitable treatment. These consequences could remain hidden from their perpetrators because they had limited understanding of the impact of their actions at another system level.

Equally, people at school level often had little appreciation of the impact their actions could have on LEA officials' efforts. Communication difficulties were exacerbated by the necessity that individuals would experience a *mixture of direct encounters and interaction through intermediaries*, especially where LEA officials were attempting to communicate with people at school level. Channels for cross-level communication were fewer than those between, say, neighbouring schools. Even here, information on which people at school level drew in making judgements about equity relied on sources from a few other schools where they had formal or informal contacts rather than the full range of schools affected.

Fifth, reorganisation initiatives did not take place in a vacuum. Efforts to achieve equity were deeply affected by *interaction with the multidimensional context* in which reorganisation initiatives were set. The *impact of an evolving profile of other planned and unplanned changes* could be substantial, as where central government cuts in budgets allocated to LEAs during the lifetime of the reorganisation initiatives masked the savings which had been made from removing surplus student places. Where staff and governors in schools had been led to expect an increase in their annual operating budget as a result of efficiency savings, they experienced a reduction. It was actually smaller than would have been the case had the savings from reorganisation not been made, but this fact could not be discerned from the budget figures disseminated to headteachers and governors. Also, what had occurred in an earlier phase was widely taken as a precedent within school communities in judging the fairness of what was happening in a subsequent phase. Unfolding central government policies imposing greater financial stringency on LEAs, which could not have been predicted at the initiation stage of the first phase of reorganisation initiatives, meant that arrangements which were affordable in an early phase might no longer be affordable in a later phase.

A very significant factor contributing to the inherent inequity of the reorganisation initiatives was the *impact of the accretion of past changes*. Incremental LEA decisions about provision and the quality of building in different localities over the years, coupled with an unplanned decline in the birth rate and so the school age population, had left the legacy of a very unequal distribution of surplus student places in different schools, housed in buildings of varied age and quality. LEA proposals for reorganisation had to serve the promotional interest of

streamlining provision across the LEA as a whole, taking into account these school level variations, and so inevitably transgressed the sectional interest of many school communities in preserving or enhancing existing provision on their patch.

Fair's Fair? Redistributing Computers from Closing Middle Schools

A significant conflict arose in one LEA where it emerged that staff from different school sectors in the same phase of reorganisation adhered to incompatible criteria underpinning their conceptions of equity. Contention surfaced over the most just way of redistributing the computers used in teaching students in the middle schools which were due to close under reorganisation proposals. The reorganisation arrangements for these schools were unusually complex, taking place over two years. In the first year, the middle schools would not receive 9-10 year old students from the nearby first schools as these students would stay on there, so taking up some of the first schools' surplus capacity. In the second year, the 10-13 year old students would all transfer to the local high school as it expanded to become an 11-18 secondary school, while the first schools would also retain their 10-11 year old students, filling up their remaining surplus capacity as they became 5-11 primary schools. For the middle schools' final year of existence, therefore, they would be three quarters full since they no longer catered for the 9-10 year old students remaining in their first schools.

The furniture and equipment for this age group of students would no longer be required in the middle schools, but it would be needed in the first schools where these students were now accommodated. The traditions of computer use in the first and middle schools were very different. In the former, one computer was allocated to each class of students, allowing only one or two students to in the class to have access to the computer at any time. In the latter, a suite of computers was housed in a dedicated computer room, where a half class of students could be taught together. The headteachers at the two first schools now catering for 9-10 year old students expected to receive one up to date computer for each class from the middle school. The headteacher of the middle school, however, had decided in consultation with other headteachers of closing middle schools that the full suite of computers was still needed for specialist teaching of half classes, even though they would be in use for only three quarters of the week. They believed in the principle that the middle school students' educational entitlement should not be compromised just because the schools were due to close next year.

Moreover, the differential impact of reorganisation proposals meant that, for middle school staff, the issue was of trivial importance compared with their main preoccupation with the equally emotive issue of staff employment. As one middle school headteacher put it: 'The business about computers makes me laugh because here I am dealing with people's livelihoods and they [first school headteachers] are arguing about a couple of computers. As if that were important!' One first school head regarded this view as 'a bit like sticking your head in the sand, because there is a problem.' The extreme and unprecedented pressures arising from the implementation of reorganisation appear - temporarily at least - to have strengthened the differences between the professional subcultures in the first and middle schools.

The middle school headteachers did send a few outdated computers to the first schools, a gesture proving to have great emotive force for the first school headteachers who perceived

that they were being unfairly treated. Two wrote to the CEO to complain. They subscribed to the principle that 9-10 year old students now being taught in first schools were entitled to the full range of educational resources, including computers, which would have been provided for them to use if they had been taught in middle schools. This meant receiving some of the up to date computers from the middle school suites. The conceptions of equity relating to computers in the first and middle schools did not match. Although both groups employed the criterion that the full entitlement of their students should be protected, the foundations of that entitlement were contradictory. To deliver that entitlement in middle schools required the full suite of computers still to be available on the fewer occasions in the week when half classes would use them. Whereas, in first schools, a quarter of the computers in these suites were needed for the additional classes of 9-10 year old students.

LEA officials' conception of equity over the redistribution of furniture and equipment was reportedly based on the principle that 'equipment should follow the children'. However, they had no authority to intervene, since the computers concerned were technically owned by the middle schools, giving middle school headteachers unique authority to decide whether to keep or hand them over right up to the reorganisation date a year away. Yet the first school headteachers looked to LEA officials to use their influence to resolve the conflict, one remarking that 'We did make constant requests…that there was some sort of arbiter or honest broker from the Authority [LEA].'

An official responsible for liaison with these first and middle schools did indeed step in. He made what turned out to be a wise move by suggesting at a meeting of local headteachers that the middle school headteachers handed over the requested number of up to date computers from their existing stock and purchased new machines to replace them. His promotional interest in ensuring the smooth implementation of reorganisation was realised by offering a way out of the impasse which was congruent with the sectional interests of the first and middle school headteachers. He knew that all the computers would be needed after reorganisation and judged that the inroad their purchase would make on the middle schools' budget would be very small in comparison with the size of that budget as a whole. Further, he was aware that most middle schools had a budget surplus and that any shortfall would be written off when they closed next year anyway. From his perspective, it was a negligible price to pay for harmonious relationships between first and middle school staff during the very stressful final year leading up to the closure of middle schools. He thus resolved the conflict between alternative forms of provision for use of computers in schools by empowering members of each faction to continue, separately, with their alternative traditions in line with their existing professional cultures.

Conclusion: Wise Moves for Managing Complex Educational Change

The evidence discussed in this paper indicates how implementation of LEA reorganisation initiatives was deeply affected by different conceptions of the principle of equity among individuals and groups seeking to achieve partially incompatible sectional interests. Arguably, characteristics of reorganisation as a complex educational change rendered it inevitable that stakeholders would have varying (and always incomplete) awareness of criteria for promoting equity adopted by others to serve the interests of different groups, and that the criteria to which they subscribed would not necessarily be mutually compatible.. It does not seem feasible that a single and universally acceptable conception of equity could be

generated by those responsible for managing the implementation of such a complex change. There are simply too many people involved in too many unpredictable situations, entailing too many unintended consequences for any general statement of principle to act as a blueprint for all interactions.

Nevertheless, the evidence does imply that something can be done to ease the path of implementation to an extent. LEA staff were centrally involved in articulating and promoting notions of equity and in arbitrating between other groups where conceptions of equity clashed, meeting with some success. A important practical implication for those charged with managing the implementation of potentially contentious complex changes like reorganisation on a large scale is to give priority to articulating and disseminating information about conceptions of equity and their associated criteria to all those who will be affected by the change, both within and between system levels. Rather than continuing to rely solely on a generalised statement of principle, dissemination of relevant information should continue throughout the implementation stage as 'case law' unfolds through application of the principle to diverse circumstances. Cumulative experience of dealing with the practicalities of equity issues, in other words, is the foundation of practical wisdom in learning to arbitrate in circumstances where there can often be no simple resolution.

This preliminary exploration of the social construction of equity as a significant factor in the process of complex educational change suggests that further research is needed which investigates in more depth the link between complexity of change and the degree to which general principles like equity may actually be achievable. The analysis offered here of characteristics which make complex educational change complex offers one potentially fruitful starting point for identifying why the notion of equity, so beguilingly simple to articulate, is so difficult to deliver to everyone's satisfaction in practice.

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